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Spy board expert sees need to better covert intelligence

By Bill Gertz
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Covert intelligence operations must be improved if the United States is to meet the security challenges of the late 1980s, a top administration intelligence adviser said last night.

"Among the tasks facing intelligence for the balance of this decade, which are pressing even at this moment, is the redefinition and legitimization of covert action," said Leo Cherne, vice chairman of the president's Foreign Intelligence Advisory Board.

"Unless, of course, we are prepared to accept the notion that covert action is legitimate if used by the Soviet Union, its client states, as well as the states which sponsor terrorism, but unacceptable as a counterforce to be used by the United States," he added.

Mr. Cherne analyzed U.S. intelligence needs in a wide-ranging speech before an audience of some 200 people that included past and present intelligence officials. The meeting was sponsored by the National Strategy Information Center.

In commenting on the need for improving covert action, Mr. Cherne said: "We are no longer in [the era when one statesman] said, 'Gentlemen do not read each other's mail,' or [Kremlinologist] George Kennan's world, where he said, 'If covert action cannot be kept secret, it must not exist' — I wish we were, [but] we're not."

Investigations of U.S. intelligence agencies during the 1970s led to

widespread leaks about covert operations that virtually ended the use of covert action as an intelligence tool. Since 1981, however, the Reagan administration has stepped up covert action programs, particularly in Latin America and Southwest Asia.

Mr. Cherne criticized a recent television drama written by three Washington Post reporters who portray the CIA as "breaking the law." He said that the program — "Under Siege" — "has helped illuminate further what has been my conviction, that the functioning of U.S. intelligence will remain seriously hampered until the American people better understand the nature of the role of foreign intelligence, the importance of its functioning and its indispensability if peace is to be preserved."

Mr. Cherne, in the first public statement by a member of the intelligence board since 1981, said that the most difficult task for intelligence services in the years ahead is to penetrate "small fanatic groups" of terrorists.

"But that intelligence task becomes a nearly impossible one unless there is a better understanding that terrorism is itself another form of warfare," he said.

He quoted extensively from a recent statement on terrorism published by the International Security Council during a conference on the subject last month in Israel.

The statement, he said, described a "radical entente" — composed of Syria, Libya, Iran, North Korea and Cuba — which is supported by the Soviet Union.